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Just Fine

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Just Fine

Nathan focused on the small packet of Oreos that rested between the two seats and among the empty bullet cartridges, dirty napkins, random screws, dog biscuits, and nails. But the Oreos, with their blue and white plastic label, gleamed like a fleck of gold embedded in ash covered stone.

The thirteen-year-old boy nervously tore another cookie from the package. The vehicle started to slow and he looked at the frost outside his window. *It just had to snow this afternoon*, he thought.

“Don’t slam that door.” His father’s gruff voice cut through before the car’s hum died.

Nathan slipped out and very gently nudged the door shut. It clinked submissively. The boy pulled a wool hat over his auburn curls and stuffed his fingers into a pair of thin gloves, watching as his father shed an outer vest.

For a moment, Nathan considered taking the gloves off. It would keep his hands free. The air in front of his face became misty from his breath.

He made his way around to his father’s side of the vehicle. The older man stuffed several bullets into the boy’s coat pocket. His father slid the long rifle off the back seat with his wrinkled hands. Fingernails rimmed with dirt, he fiddled with a cartridge and shoved it into the magazine. Two more bullets followed the first.

Numerous scrapes and scars covered his knuckles and fingers. Teal blood vessels bulged, creating hills and valleys under the dark mottled skin, and they reminded his son of a warrior’s hands; hands that had served a lifetime of hard loyal work. Those hands were the single visible sign of his old age.

He offered the .30-06 to Nathan, whose soft gloved fingers wrapped around the smooth barrel and butt, gripping tightly until he checked the safety. Altering the position so it rested in his arms, he whispered to his father, “Do we need anything else?”

Nathan gritted his teeth as a slight, dry wind scraped his face. Like his mother, he had never been able to stand the cold. His father tromped away from the truck.

It begins, Nathan thought as he turned his eyes toward the ground, carefully placing his boots, step by step, inside his

father's imprints. He avoided the faded, gold grass, recognizing the brittle look of crunch-makers. Pride at his own silent footsteps dampened the envy that made him want to stomp confidently behind his father.

Still, despite his best attempts, the sound of both their steps resonated through empty air. Nathan couldn't imagine any animal missing the noise. But his father knew how to track and, no matter how disbelieving his son had been on other hunting trips, they always returned home with exactly what his father wanted.

They reached a barbed wire fence. His father pulled two wires apart and pushed through before Nathan could help. The son rushed forward to uselessly hold the upper wire as the older man finished pulling his leg through. His father put a hand out for the gun and Nathan passed it over mutely. The boy started to maneuver the wires apart, but already the bottom was being pushed down by the scuffed leather boots of his father and the upper was stretched tightly by the old hands. Nathan hunched down and twisted through the fence.

He could sense the tension on his jacket as he came across. He knew without looking that he'd caught a barb. Pretending nothing was wrong, he received the .30-06 and then waited until he was following behind before checking the jacket. A slight snag, nothing his mother couldn't fix, he thought, as he turned his head toward his father.

The older man continuously searched the land for deer. Nathan followed his father's lead and tried to maintain his focus on the surroundings.

They crossed wild fields carpeted with speckled white snow. They traipsed through groves of Cottonwood and striped Quaking Aspen, meandered over hardened creeks that trailed and curled like an aged man's twisted spine.

Nathan noticed peachy hues highlighting the horizon. For a moment, Nathan considered commenting on the unique sunset, but no. Silence was the key to hunting, and besides, his father wouldn't appreciate it. He'd just grunt in agreement and go back to searching for deer.

Time melded in such a way that Nathan wasn't sure how long they'd been out. Could have been an hour, could have been five. He supposed his father would know exactly what time it was.

He couldn't remember when they headed out. Judging by the vibrant sky it had to be getting late.

Relief settled in at this thought. It was done then. He had survived. Nathan knew they could not hunt in the dark and he welcomed the increasing arctic cold that came as light died. The chill wouldn't matter. Their truck would be warm.

A small part of him was disappointed because they had not shot anything, another trip was guaranteed. He gazed at his father, who frowned, and Nathan's discontent swelled. His father would be grouchy.

Trying to orient himself in relation to the vehicle, he looked back at the sunset, which was more coral pink than orange. It seemed they were going east, but Nathan wasn't able to tell if they were heading back or had circled in a much wider loop than he'd thought. He was so focused on the sunset he almost ran into his father, who abruptly stopped. Nathan backed up, confused at the pause in their progress.

His father motioned with his hand, waving at the higher side of the ditch. Slowly, carefully, the older man made his way over there. Nathan followed his father up the slanted, frozen earth. He could hear his own heartbeat. As his father peeked over the ridge, Nathan closed in the space between them.

His father's ashy haired head wavered and tilted down toward his son. He reached out a hand. Nathan hesitated, unsure whether he was asking for the gun or if he was offering assistance in climbing up. His father impatiently gestured at the gun.

Feeling foolish, Nathan passed it to him and scrambled up the mound. The new vantage point revealed a herd of robust bucks, scattered across the snow crusted meadow, tentatively nibbling hidden grass. Each one picked its head up occasionally and gazed around, tender ears perked. Not one gave him and his father a suspicious stare.

Nathan's heartbeat convulsed. He attempted to keep his breaths even. The whole day had spiraled around to this very point. For a moment, he could see himself crouching and watching, experiencing the sum of all moments.

A gentle push on his shoulder reminded him of the reality of the situation. He turned to see the rifle held out to him. But his arms wouldn't move. He couldn't bend them, couldn't reach out or stretch.

And then, as if someone had been trying to shoot with the safety on, a sudden click in Nathan's mind changed everything. He couldn't shoot with his gloves on. His hands moved on their own, pulling the gloves off his pale fingers, stowing them away in a back pocket, and finally reaching for the gun.

Nathan rested the rifle comfortably in position. The ridge provided a perfect spot, just enough brush to cover them, the perfect height to see the whole herd, and a sturdy dead log for a rest. As if the earth had already arranged everything.

Nathan peered through his scope, trying to compare differently sized antlers. Unable to pick the biggest, he glanced back at his father who watched through binoculars.

Nudging the older man, Nathan mouthed, "Which one?"

His father pulled up the binoculars, and then pulled two fingers up on his left hand.

Second from the left, Nathan read the signs, and then put his eye to the scope. He slid the barrel back and forth, scanning the group on the left. Nathan debated for a minute about the second and third bucks which were standing close together. It looked like the third one was bigger. It was possible they had switched places. He focused in on the ribs of the second one and considered double checking with his father.

Nathan clicked the safety off and breathed in smoothly; practicing the techniques his father had taught him. A frosty breeze bit the back of his neck.

The deer looked straight at them, its body frozen and posing like a plastic garden decoration. Nathan softly squeezed the trigger, and at the same time, a deafening shot blasted into his ears.

The herd scattered like leaves spreading across snow on a windy day between autumn and winter. Lagging behind the group was the one he'd shot.

His father still had the binoculars up. "Gut shot," he grumbled, glaring at his son. "Come on, we'll have to go after it." And the older man pushed himself up over the ridge.

Nathan barely remembered the safety as he staggered up the ridge. He chided himself for thinking he'd actually done it right.

His father stumbled down the other side of the ridge and Nathan followed. Midway across the field, his father stopped.

"It's pausing." Looking back quickly at his son, "It shouldn't

get far.”

They closed in the space and Nathan could see it, a golden beauty, trembling amongst cobalt gray Cottonwood trunks.

“It’s the wrong one,” his father accused.

“It was the second one.” It came out as a weak mumble.

His father shook his head slightly. “Give it here,” he said, reaching for the gun.

The words slipped out before Nathan could halt them, “No, I’ll do it.”

His father gave him a hard look. Nathan said what he’d felt. He had put the animal into such misery, and he would put him out of it.

Nathan flicked the safety off and aimed carefully this time, thinking that he would never let himself miss again. He would always be this careful in the future. No other animal would suffer because of his sloppiness. The animal teetered in his scope for a moment and then regained balance.

The shot went off and the noise seemed dead. Nathan heard the thump of the buck falling.

He looked up from the gun. The deer’s rib cage expanded slowly, held for a moment, and then shuddered back down. It didn’t move.

His father started toward it and Nathan caught up behind him. When they reached the deer, he was taken aback by the perfection of the creature. Before he could stop himself he was reaching down, stroking the deer’s neck. Part of him wanted to apologize aloud.

“That was a decent shot,” his father judged, kneeling down to look more closely at the two wounds. “We’re close to the truck,” he said. “We’ll be able to drive over here. I suppose I’ll clean the deer. Gut wounds smell awful.”

The saliva in Nathan’s mouth tasted metallic at the thought of digging through the internal organs of the animal. Yet something in his father’s watchful stare made him offer, “I...I want to help. But you’ll have to tell me what to do.”

Dark red blood splattered Nathan’s fingers. Ignoring the intense stench and the bitter cold, he listened to his father’s instructions carefully and with accurate precision followed through. When any uncertainty slowed him down, he asked aloud. At one point, his question was not answered.

Nathan glanced up. His father stared off at the horizon.

“Did you hear me?” Nathan asked.

Slowly, his father turned his gaze toward his son. “You’ve got it. Just keep cutting it a couple more inches there.”

Nathan looked down at the deer and then back to his father.

His father’s eyes wandered back to the fiery violet sunset and almost so quietly that Nathan didn’t hear it, he whispered, “It was a fine day for it, just fine.”